Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

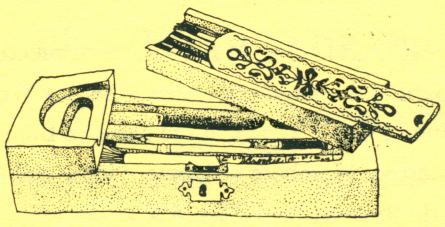
It is almost time again for our annual meeting and potluck dinner which will occur on Tuesday, May 8. This year it will be held at St. Anselm's Episcopal Church in the Burton Valley area because the Veteran's Hall was not available. Look for details in this newsletter. Save the date, and try to join us for a very enjoyable evening. We will honor Acalanes High School for its fifty years of excellence.

Our rotating historical display on the west wall of the Lucky supermarket has inspired many favorable comments. Congratulations to Bill and Irma Somerton for their good efforts in creating these displays. We have been asked to put up a similar display in the San Francisco Federal Savings and Loan office by Lafayette Branch Manager Candace Bonham, and this has been installed recently. We appreciate San Francisco Federal's interest and we are glad to share some of our historical materials with the many people who visit that office.

Do stop to see the displays at Lucky Stores and S.F. Federal when you can. Our main archives are located in the Lafayette Library for those of you who want to dig a little deeper into Lafayette's history.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to our Board members for their dedicated work in behalf of the Historical Society. It has been a pleasure to work with such fine people during the year.

Happy Easter to all of you.



Best regards,

Oliver D. Hamlin

Welcome to new Life Members: Rex and Lorraine Kaufman, Lee and Lois Schell, Bill and Irma Somerton, Jop and Irene Van Overveen, Bill and Bonnie Wakeman.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT

Jop Van Overveen, chair of this year's Nominating Committee, is pleased to report the acceptance of nomination to the Society's Board of Directors by three veteran LHS Board members and two people new to the Board. Bob and Collette Means join Ruth Dyer, Oliver Hamlin, and Ray Peters on the slate to be presented to membership at the Annual Meeting. Terms run three years. > > >

DOROTHY GITTINGER MUTNICK

Historian, indefatigable researcher, and writer, Dorothy Gittinger Mutnick died November 27, 1989.

Over the years Mrs. Mutnick published a number of works on local history. *Some California Poppies*—which she published in two volumes in 1980—is carefully documented, remarkably detailed local history. Anyone interested in knowing about the places or the people of Lafayette's past will find it essential. Her thoroughness and determination were notable; as an example, Dorothy Mutnick learned Spanish for the specific purpose of reading original Spanish records. To research the history of the area, she said, there was an "imperative need to learn Spanish." > > >

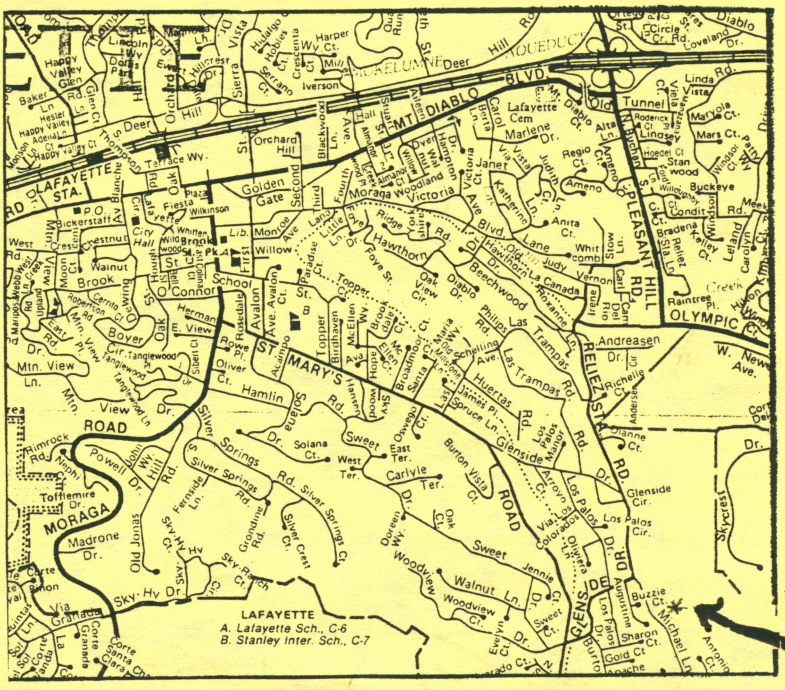
1989-90 BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS

Jack & Barbara Bailey... Cor. Sec. / Membership / Dir.
Ruth Dyer.....Recording Secretary / Sales / Dir.
George Ely ..... Dir.
Oliver Hamlin.....President / Dir.
Nancy Holtzapple..... Treasurer / Dir.
Dick Johnston.....Annual Potluck Dinner
Sandy Kimball..... Publicity
Ray Peters ..... Vice Pres. / Plaza Park / Dir.
Bill & Irma Somerton .....Archives / Clippings / Dir.
Shirley Thomson .....Newsletter / Dir.
Irene Van Overveen..... Dir.
Joseph (Jop) Van Overveen..... Dir.
Bill Wakeman.....Landmarks / Dir.
George Wasson.....Program / Fire Engine
Betsy Willcuts..... Walking Tours

HISTORY DISPLAYS

Bill and Irene Somerton have a new display almost ready to go. "Acalanes: Fifty Years of Excellence" will be put up in mid-April in the display case at Lucky's in Plaza Center.

If you missed seeing the earlier display on old LaFayette, you can catch it at the Lafayette Branch of San Francisco Federal. > > >



MAP shows routes to Annual Meeting. St. Anselm's Episcopal Church, 682 Michael Lane (just .2 mile off Reliez Station Road).

DUES FOR 1990: Family membership is $10 per year; business membership, $50; student membership, $2.50. Life memberships are available at $100. > > >

NEXT BOARD MEETING: Next meeting of the Board and committee chairs is set for Wednesday, June 13, at 7:30 p.m. at the home of Bill and Irma Somerton. Members welcome. Please call the hosts for directions (284-9785). > > >

ANNUAL MEETING PROGRAM — TUESDAY, MAY 8, 1990

ACALANES HIGH SCHOOL
1940 - 1990

by George Wasson, Program Chair

Acalanes High School enrolled its first class of students in 1940, but the process of starting and building the school began before that year. The Lafayette Historical Society has been given a well-kept scrapbook that documents the planning and completion of the school. Parts of the scrapbook's contents will be displayed at the Lucky Store windows in the Plaza Shopping Center, but much more of the contents will be available for viewing at the annual meeting and potluck dinner on May 8. The evening's program will be devoted to memories of ACALANES UNION HIGH SCHOOL past to present!

A panel of past teachers, past students, and past and present administrators will be asked to remember with others the events that have happened in the school's history. The current principal, Mr. Orlando "Olie" Chiavini, will be on that panel along with Ms. Ruth Dyer and others not yet confirmed. There are several former teachers still in the nearby area and some graduates of the first classes.

It should be interesting to discuss the changes that have taken place at Acalanes High School in the last fifty years. For instance, did you know that there was once an agreed dress code for students? And did you know that the school was originally intended to enroll students from western Contra Costa County and east toward Concord? The roster when the school opened shows that students came from Canyon (3), Lafayette (116), Moraga (11), Orinda (47), Walnut Creek (202), and Pleasant Hill (6). According to the FIRST DIRECTORY, issued March 1941, there were 396 students enrolled when the school opened on September 10, 1940.

This should be an entertaining and informative evening. > > >

PROGRAM

*St. Anselm's Episcopal Church **
682 Michael Lane, Lafayette

6:00 - 7:00 - Social Hour
7:00 - 8:00 - Dinner — 8:00 - Program

Please bring your favorite hot dish, casserole, or salad for eight people. Board members will bring desserts. Dinner drinks will be provided, but a small charge will be made for drinks during the social hour.

Please bring salad tools or a serving spoon with your name on the back.

Phone Richard Johnson (283-0199) if you have any questions.

** See Lafayette map on page two with routes to Michael Lane.*

From left: Bob Robinson (handyman), Robert E. McNeil, William, Alice, Gertrude (Mrs. Robert), Bertha, and Ruth McNeil at Pioneer Store, c. 1910.

LOCAL HISTORY PUBLICATIONS

The following publications are on display and available for purchase at the Contra Costa County Historical Society's History Center (1700 Oak Park Boulevard, Room C-5):

- *Guide to Historic Points of Interest: San Ramon Valley*, just published by the Museum of San Ramon Valley, $5.
- Bernard Freedman: *Index to History of Contra Costa County* (Slocum, 1882), $4.25.
- J. P. Monro-Fraser: *History of Contra Costa County* (Slocum, 1882). Book and Freedman index together are $36.25.
- Bernard Freedman. *Index to F. J. Hulaniski's History of Contra Costa County* (1917).
- *Contra Costa County Chronicles* (various issues), $5 each.
- Contra Costa County Map of Historical Points of Interest (1975), $3.
- "Contra Costa Co. Ca." (1893). Maps, sketches, and statistical information (two-sided, 24"x38"). Available at $12.50; $10 additional copies.

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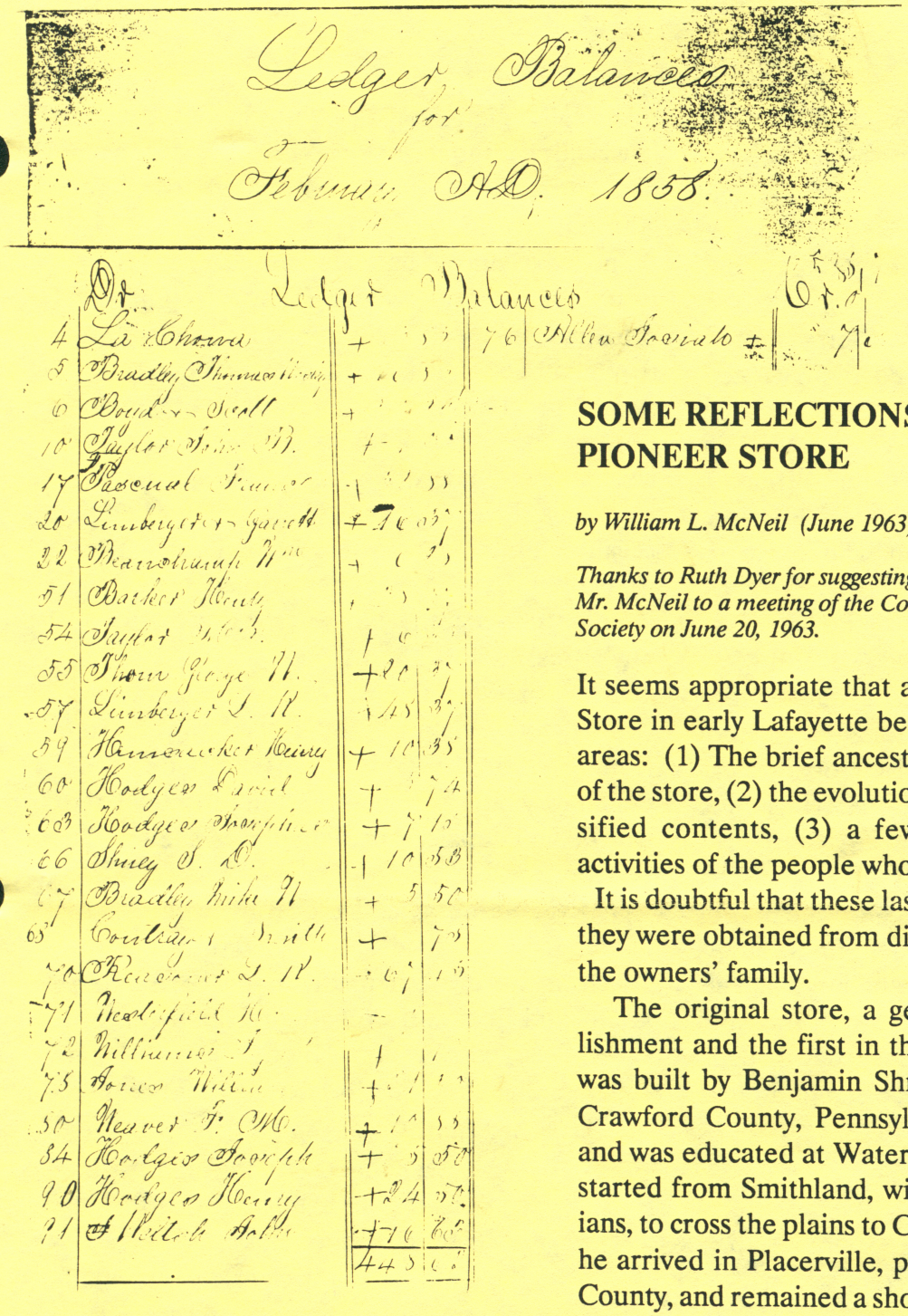

Ledger Balances
for
February A.D. 1858.

Dr. Ledger Balances Cr.

Ledger page (reduced) showing general store accounts of Benjamin Shreve of February 1858.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PIONEER STORE

by William L. McNeil (June 1963)

Thanks to Ruth Dyer for suggesting this transcription of a talk by Mr. McNeil to a meeting of the Contra Costa County Historical Society on June 20, 1963.

It seems appropriate that a discussion of the Pioneer Store in early Lafayette be divided into the following areas: (1) The brief ancestry of the long-time owners of the store, (2) the evolution of the store and its diversified contents, (3) a few of the happenings and activities of the people who visited this landmark.

It is doubtful that these last accounts are on record as they were obtained from discussions with members of the owners' family.

The original store, a general merchandise establishment and the first in the settlement of Lafayette, was built by Benjamin Shreve. Shreve was born in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, on August 2, 1828, and was educated at Waterford Academy. In 1852 he started from Smithland, with a company of Kentuckians, to cross the plains to California. After six months he arrived in Placerville, pressed on to Contra Costa County, and remained a short while in Ygnacio Valley. After a trip to Oregon, he returned to Contra Costa County and taught school in Lafayette from 1853-1854. It is interesting to note that Shreve was the first teacher to ply his trade in Lafayette, receiving the sum of $150 for six months' work. In 1855 a store was constructed on Golden Gate Way, and Shreve began his life as a merchant. The store was later moved to its present location adjacent to the plaza.

Shreve, after petitioning the United States Congress, was appointed Postmaster in 1857 and maintained the first post office in the general store for twenty-four years. He named the post office La Fayette after the French nobleman. Previous to this the community was known as Centerville. Shreve had two sons, Fred and Milton; the latter finally managed the store until its sale to Henry Sweet. Robert Elam McNeil purchased the store from Sweet in 1902.

(Pioneer Store, continued)

Robert Elam McNeil's mother was born crossing the plains at Reno, Nevada. She was the daughter of Andrew Allen, a member of the Elam Brown wagon train. It is interesting to note that this train camped on occasions with the Donner Party and crossed the Sierra shortly before the Donners experienced their widely-known difficulty.

Robert McNeil's father was William McNeil, an emigrant from Londonderry County, Ireland. Robert McNeil married Gertrude Thomson, daughter of Robert Thomson who came to Lafayette from Canada in 1869.

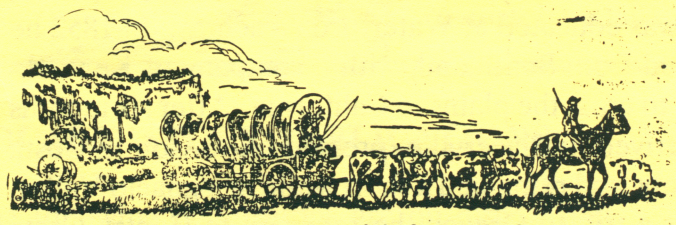
Shortly after acquiring the store, the name was changed from Robert E. McNeil General Merchandise to the Pioneer Store. The merchandise was not too different from any small town store of that time. Such items as drugs, groceries, dry goods, harness, shoes, hardware, fuels (including gasoline, stove oil, and coal), and large barrels of syrup and molasses were always in stock. The items most vivid in my memory were the bins of dried apples, apricots, peaches, and prunes which were sampled regularly, and large barrels of syrup. The syrup barrels were kept in a cool cellar below the store which was reached through a trap-door in the floor. On one sampling tour to the cellar I left a spigot slightly open, and when it was discovered more syrup than I've ever seen had covered the floor. My grandfather was not amused!

The merchandise handled in the store was obtained in several ways. Heavy freight was originally shipped via Southern Pacific Railway to Walnut Creek where it was later picked up in a wagon and brought to Lafayette. Hitchhiking was not uncommon in those days. In fact, it was welcomed by many drivers who were glad to have company. R. E. McNeil used to laugh when he recalled a hitchhiker whom he had transported to Walnut Creek on numerous occasions. He later learned that the man was making the trip to buy groceries in Walnut Creek.

When the Sacramento Northern Railway was constructed, freight was left at the Lafayette station. When the freight was unloaded, the engineer would sound three long blasts of the whistle and depart, thus signaling McNeil of the delivery.

Perishable items and groceries were usually hauled from Oakland—a long and tiresome trip. Journeys were often made to Pacheco where grains and flour were obtained from a concern called Russi and Sonner. This business was later run by Frank and Theodore Russi. It is doubtful that R. E. NcNeil could have known that the young man waiting on him was to be his future son-in-law, Theodore Russi.

Other items clearly in my mind are the two weapons sometimes seen by the children in the family—and always with interest. One was a large single-action revolver which made its home under the safe at the rear of the store. The other was a small pearl handled revolver which was sometimes carried on wagon trips to Oakland. There were holdups occasionally along this route as a considerable



Store bearing name of Lafayette's first business now serves as modern food market.

Established by Pioneer Merchant Benjamin Shreve over 100 years ago, the Pioneer Store served as a community center for the Lafayette Area. People brought their grain to be ground by its grist mill. It served as a stagecoach stop as well as the first postoffice for Lafayette. It was the sole source of supply for many a rancher, farmer, or prospector. Although ownership has been changed and its location moved, it continues today to enjoy the patronage of many of the old established families of the Lafayette area.

THE **Pioneer Store** of Lafayette

3500 Golden Gate Way — Vincent Lombardo, prop.

WALNUT KERNEL 8/11/1957

(Pioneer Store, continued)

amount of cash was carried on these buying trips. The trip to Oakland was finally made through the old tunnel. In this connection, R. E. McNeil and his family camped near this site while he and many others helped in its construction. Gertrude McNeil became the first woman to pass through the tunnel when it was just days away from completion. The bore was situated rather high on hill which led a workman known as Bum Lamp to remark that if they had gone much farther up it would have been necessary to haul dirt to the spot in order to have something through which to tunnel.

On one occasion after the tunnel's completion Gertrude McNeil was driving a team to Oakland through the dark, timber-braced structure when suddenly a man leaped from behind a piling directly into her path. This so startled her that she accomplished a complete turn and galloped back to Lafayette!

For many years the Pioneer Store was the only general merchandise store in Lafayette. But it provided the community with more than syrup and horse collars. In the afternoons and evenings the store became the gathering place for many. The various forms of amusement included pitching horseshoes, baseball, foot races, wrestling, and listening to a contraption called a gramophone. On certain occasions a lone bagpiper would make an appearance complete in kilt and the usual regalia. Much to the amusement of the townspeople, he would march around the plaza, in and out of the local saloon, and in front of the store. The identity of this person is not known, but his presence was very much a part of the local scene.

R. E. McNeil was especially fond of wrestling, and stories about his leaving the counter to engage in this sport in the dirt in front of the store were common. Among those who loved to wrestle with McNeil was a Japanese woodcutter who came to Lafayette shortly after 1900.

Another incident which helps paint the picture of life in Lafayette around the store concerns Hugh Fraser. Fraser taught school in the community and boarded at Peter Thomson's home. He loved to engage in the various activities and sports around the store in the evenings, especially the foot races and wrestling. Fraser had no transportation home on weekends, and before leaving the store it was sometimes dark. Undaunted, he would strike out over the Lafayette ridge and through the hills to his home in Martinez.

R. E. McNeil continued to do business in the Pioneer Store until his death on February 2, 1935. His widow sold the store to George Hinkley in June of the same year. This structure is now being utilized as a toy store. < < > > >

UPCOMING EVENTS...

April 8 .....Antioch Historical Society museum opening and Recollections Tea, 2:00pm, Antioch Senior Citizens Riverview Room.

May 5.....Tao House Tour, Orinda Historical Society. Information: call 254-3043.

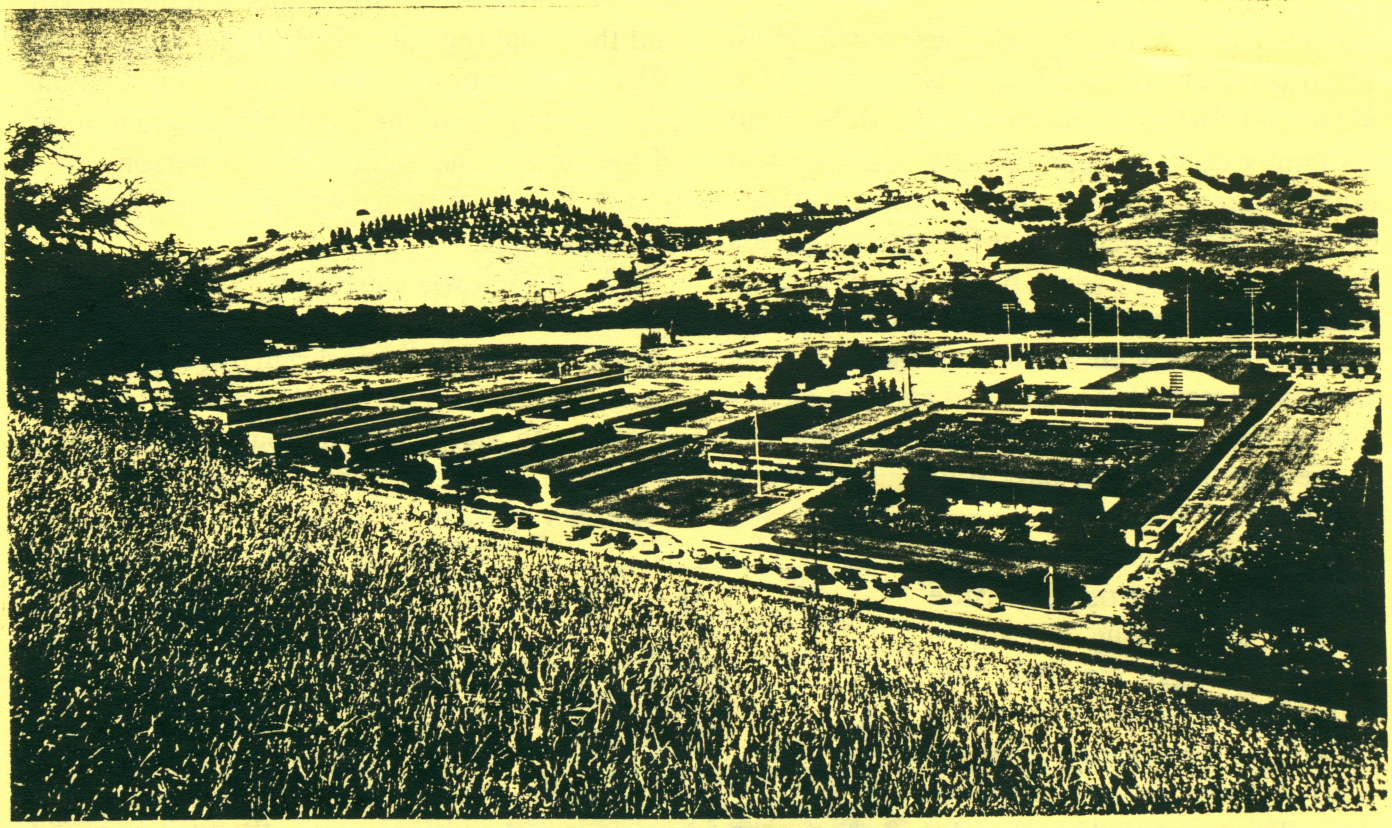
May 8.....Annual dinner meeting and program on Acalanes High School, Lafayette Historical Society, 6:00p.m. at St. Anselm's Episcopal Church meeting rooms. Call Richard Johnson: 283-0199.

May 17.....Dinner meeting, San Ramon Valley Historical Scoiety, to be held at the Branding Iron Restaurant. Call 837-2483 for information.

June 3.....Orinda Historical Society annual meeting. For information, call 254-3043.

ACALANES HIGH SCHOOL – FIFTY YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

May 8 Dinner Meeting Program Celebrates Acalanes



Acalanes High School, about 1950

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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FIRST CLASS MAIL